

THE PYGMIES

AFRICANS OF THE CONGO FOREST

SONIA
BLEEKER

ILLUSTRATED BY
EDITH G. SINGER



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AFRICANS OF THE CONGO FOREST

By Sonia Bleeker

Illustrated by Edith G. Singer

Although the Pygmies are widely known for their small size, surprisingly little additional information is available about them. At home in the depths of the Congo rain forests, these Africans have had little contact with the outside world. In the fourth title of her series on African tribal groups, Dr. Bleeker turns her attention to these appealing people and presents a well-rounded picture of their way of life.

The Pygmies dwell in small, nomadic bands, and so the book begins with an account of a typical group of Mbuti Pygmies moving the location of their camp. Other chapters follow on their hunting customs, family structure, religion, and history. A high point in the narrative is the explanation of the Molimo ceremony, which is a haunting memorial honoring the dead. The author calls it one of the most beautiful rituals ever developed by a people, and her description movingly conveys the reassurance it provides.

Enhanced by a number of carefully researched line drawings, this valuable study will be of highest interest to every student of anthropology.

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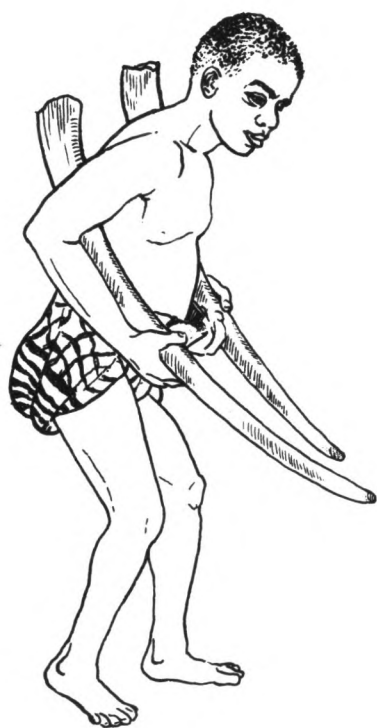
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THE PYGMIES

Africans of the Congo Forest

Sonia Bleeker

illustrated by Edith G. Singer



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1

In the Forest



The homeland of the Congo Pygmies is the vast, dark rain forest in the northeast corner of the Republic of the Congo. In this forest, called Ituri (Ee-too-ree), these people, who are among the oldest of the African continent, have lived for perhaps 6000 to 7000 years. Their way of life is like that of their predeces-

sors of a million years ago. Today the number of pygmies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is about 150,000. No actual census of the Pygmy population has ever been made, however, since outsiders cannot penetrate the forest well enough to take one and the Pygmies are not interested in such statistics.

The word *pygmy* comes from the Greek, and it specifies a measure of length. The name was imposed by immigrants and traders, who first met these short forest people and thought that they were dwarfs. The men average four and a half feet in height. The women average four feet five inches, and, as is typical of populations the world over, they tend to be shorter than the men. In weight, the men and women average 100 pounds. Their African neighbors, many of whom are short, too, average about five feet in height and so are usually only slightly bigger. Archeologists who have examined old Pygmy skeletons say that these forest people were once

taller and heavier. How their reduction in size occurred is still a mystery. The animals of the Ituri forest are also smaller in size than their relatives elsewhere in Africa. Perhaps good reasons for this difference will be found in time to come.

When in the forest, the Pygmies are quite happy with their small stature, since it enables them to live in their surroundings more comfortably. But out of the forest, their neighbors make them feel short and inferior and some call them "monkeys."

As might be expected, these people do not call themselves Pygmies. There are many different bands of Pygmies, and each has its own name. The four main Pygmy groups in the region of the Congo are the Binga, the Tswa, the Gesera, and the Mbuti (Em-boo-tee). Within the Mbuti are many bands. Some groups still live exclusively in the forest as nomads. Others have moved into permanent villages

and have learned farming. Some who live near the water are fishermen. The Mbuti of the Ituri forest have been studied more carefully than any other group by European and American experts, and so we have a more complete and rounded knowledge of their lives. These people, numbering about 40,000, are still nomads, mainly hunters and food gatherers, and they have kept most of their old ways.

At times the Pygmies are thought of as children, perhaps because they are small and appear a carefree, happy people. However, they are men in accomplishments, in courage, in hunting, wise in the ways of the forest and its wildlife. They have lived independently for thousands of years in their forest home, hunting game and gathering food. This harmonious adjustment of people, wildlife, and plants is such that no animal or plant species has ever been exterminated by the Pygmies. In fact, they themselves are a vital and necessary part



of their surroundings. They help maintain the balance that is best for the rain forest and the creatures and plants within it. In the democratic way of living together that they have worked out each person enjoys equal rights and respect.

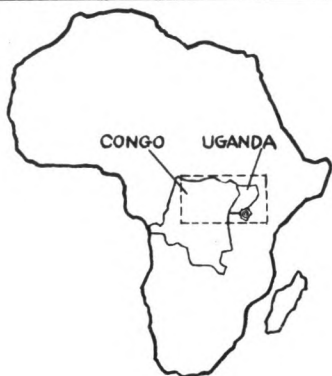
There are different points of view about the appearance of the Pygmies. Some observers emphasize their smooth, golden skin and large, clear eyes. They marvel at their nimbleness in walking through the forest and climbing trees. Others point out their small stature, big hands and feet, protruding belly, flattened nose, and wide mouth. To me, these small, light-skinned people seem rather handsome and appealing. They are totally unselfconscious in their brief bark breechcloths and belts. Their children's faces are beautiful indeed. The hair of men and women is short, worn in tightly coiled tufts, and the bare golden skin of the skull shines between these tufts.

All adults wear the same, single garment. Children and babies are naked. They wear little fiber belts, fiber armbands and necklaces, on which pieces of wood are strung, as decoration. These decorations are tokens of their close relationship to their forest home. A woman carries her baby in a sling. Since all babies are breast-fed, the mother remains close to her child. With her baby in its sling, resting comfortably against her left side, the mother is free to use her right hand for gathering plants, cooking, and attending to her camp chores.

The territory of the Mbuti is some 25,000 square miles, and it is located within the Congo rain forest, which covers about 50,000 square miles. A rolling land, the forest spans the equator almost from coast to coast along the curve of the Congo River. This mighty and important river is estimated to be 3000 miles long. It begins in the southeastern corner of the Republic of the Congo, where it is called the Lu-



DOTTED OUTLINE
INDICATES
THE HOMELAND
OF THE PYGMIES



alaba, and runs north to Stanley Falls, where it acquires the name Congo. There it arches to the west, then turns southwestward, and farther south empties into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Congo rain forest is bounded on the east by the series of lakes of East Africa. Its western boundary is formed by the Congo River as it turns to run southwest to the western coast of Africa. To the north, the forest extends to the edge of the Sahara Desert, and it meets the Kivu Mountains in the south. This vast area, long thought to be inaccessible, is still mostly virgin country today.

In the rain forest, it rains daily or every other day. The rain comes in the afternoon and lasts from about four to six. It starts with a darkening of the sky and the appearance of thunderheads. Strong winds shake the treetops. Branches begin to crack and fall, and often trees come crashing down. Then lightning and thunder arrive—and the downpour starts. By

this time every living thing in the forest, including the Pygmies, has found shelter. The force of the rain pelts the dense umbrella of treetops, which, fortunately, protects the forest floor so that it gets a generous shower and not a flood. The leaf-covered Mbuti huts suffer little. At last the rain stops, leaving the forest dripping and humid.

The average rainfall is between seventy and eighty inches annually. This amount is about the same as that of the Northwest Coast region in the United States, but more than twice that of tropical Florida, where I live. As a result, the humidity in the forest is ninety-five percent. Temperatures during the day vary between seventy to eighty degrees. At night it gets colder. The Mbuti keep small fires going in front of their huts until morning, since they do not have blankets.

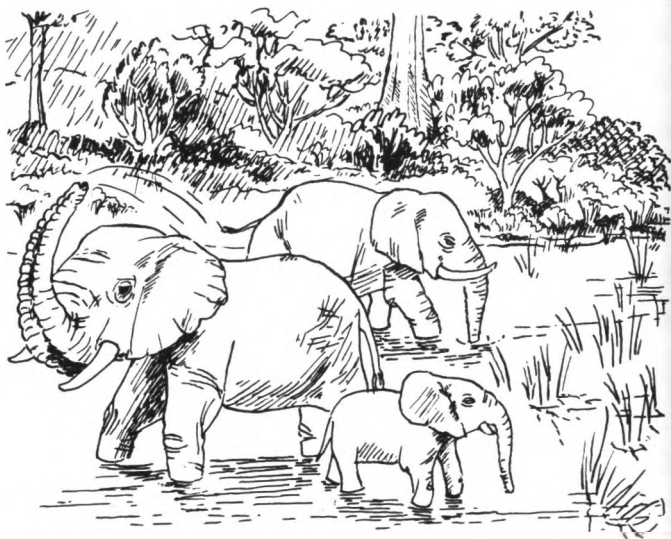
As the rains come regularly and almost daily, except during the dry months of January

and February, taboos have grown up among the Pygmies connected with water and with rain. They believe that sometimes a pebble thrown thoughtlessly into a stream will cause a down-pour. To pick certain flowers—not used for food—may bring on rain. All people the world over regard the rainbow as a sign of goodness and hope. The Mbuti, who most likely learned the attitude from their village neighbors, now fear it. Some vaguely explain that harmful water animals turn into rainbows and kill human beings. When a person slips in a stream and drowns, the Mbuti believe water animals have grabbed him.

To stop a storm, an old man will wave his arms in the direction in which he wishes the rain to go and say: "Stop the rain. Stop the rain." He may then throw a bundle of leaves into the wind and scatter ashes from his fire, so the forest floor will dry quicker.

The forest is full of streams, of running fresh

and clean waters. In some places there is dense undergrowth: bushes, saplings, reeds, and intertwined lianas. In others, there is hardly any undergrowth—just the soft, green, spongy forest floor. The huge trees of African mahoganies, teakwood, and oil palms, with crowns that are 200 to 300 feet high, provide eternal shade and coolness. From the outside the thick forest looks black. Once inside it, however, color-



ful, large leaves and flowering trees and shrubs add a gaiety that disperses any feelings of gloom. Rather, a person is awed by beauty and strange sounds. Always there are calls of invisible birds, high in the treetops; monkeys chatter and insects buzz. The forest abounds in animals, but they stay well out of sight.

The Mbuti cannot stand the burning sun and the flies of the open country for long. They actually become ill and need to return to the forest to recover. Because the Mbuti are accustomed to the clean water of their forest streams, they get sick from the polluted water in the villages bordering the forest. In fact, some of the diseases to which other Africans are immune make the Mbuti very sick. If they stay in their homeland, however, these forest people apparently live much longer than their Congolese neighbors.

A Mbuti loves the forest. He sings songs to it, prays to it, dances to it, and warms it with

his fires. The forest is his mother, who shelters and protects him. Surefootedly he glides rather than walks on the rust-colored forest roads and paths overhung with lianas and creepers. Within a distance of a few yards, a Mbuti is camouflaged and becomes practically invisible. His build seems just right for forest living. His long torso, short legs, large feet, and long arms enable him to dodge in and out along the trails. Here and there he may bend a twig or push a broken branch into the green spongy floor as a signpost for his return journey or as a marker for those companions who follow him. Or he may purposely toss freshly cut sticks far away to throw an unwelcome person off his trail. He is not hindered, as an outsider would be, by clothing and shoes. If soaked by the dripping trees, his body dries off with the first breath of wind in the forest.

There are almost as many languages among the Congolese as there are tribes—perhaps 500

in all. A new language is supposed to appear in the Congo at every fifty miles. But most of these languages are interrelated. Many have word roots in common, and people can understand each other. Other Congolese languages, however, are as different as English is from Russian.

Ki is a prefix meaning language. The Mbuti speak Kimbuti. Most Mbuti also speak Kingwana, which is similar to Swahili. The common Congolese language is Kingwana. It is not hard to learn. Swahili—more correctly Kiswahili—is also widespread, since it is spoken all over East Africa. An estimated twenty million Africans use Swahili, and Europeans appear to prefer it. Somehow Swahili fits the mood of Africa. A cheerful *jambo*, meaning *how do you do*, or *asante*, meaning *thank you*, always gets an answering smile everywhere in East Africa. Today some American students who wish to visit Africa are studying Swahili.

Language, like legends and customs, helps trace a people's beginnings and history. From the study of all three, we have come to the conclusion that the Pygmies are indeed a very, very ancient people. Their way of living, evidently unchanged for many thousands of years, points out the way other people of the tropical forests the world over lived in prehistoric times. This forest life, so full of gaiety and joy, is harmonious and satisfying. Perhaps this is the way all early men lived—in happiness and not, as we once imagined, in fear and danger.

2

A Mbuti Camp



The time has come to move to a new campsite. The men of the Mbuti band have decided to move the next morning. The band itself may consist of between twenty and thirty people, about five to six families. They have been in the same campsite for several weeks, and the grounds are trampled. The huts appear frayed,

and the odor of the camp's refuse is unpleasant.

The women rise at dawn to go over to the stream to bathe and get cooking water. They begin packing immediately after they have blown up the embers for the small fires on which they will bake a few plantains for the morning meal. The men and children bathe next and eat the food, which is now cooked. Some men eat in front of their hut. Others join a group of hunters and share the food the wife prepares. The women fill their burden baskets, tie up bundles, put baby in a sling, and sit down to wait for the men to depart.

The men too have packed. A man's belongings are a small knife and an axe, which he slips into his wide belt, a long knife, and a machete for cutting brush. He also tucks his pipe into his belt. In addition, he carries a spear, a quiver of arrows, and a bow. His heaviest article is his hunting net, which he slings over



both shoulders. If a man's son is big enough, he helps with the net. Some men bring along their small, low chairs, too. Others prefer to make a fresh chair in the new camp.

Thus loaded, the Mbuti band starts out with noise and loud calls. They will keep up the commotion all through the journey, so everyone behind them knows just where they are at all times. The men go first, and the youths follow them. Age-mates among the younger boys also stay together, with much laughter and shouting. The women, girls, and children come behind. Before leaving the camp, each woman picks up a few embers from her fire and puts them into a packet of green leaves. As she walks she swings the small packet up and down and, from time to time, looks into it and blows on it. In this way, she keeps the embers burning till she reaches the new campsite and is ready to start her fire.

The Mbuti know now the use of matches

and use them in the villages, when they can buy or beg them. But to rely on matches in the damp forest is not practical. Live embers are much safer, and the women can travel many miles with them, sure that they will have a fire after setting up camp. Once one fire in camp starts, others can, of course, borrow a burning stick for theirs. Toward nightfall a communal fire is made with burning logs borrowed from the fires of several households.

Archeologists believe that the Pygmies acquired fire from other invading Africans, but the Mbuti claim that they were the first to learn how to use it. One of their legends tells that long, long ago the chimpanzees alone were able to start fire. They kept their skill a secret and would share it with no one. One Mbuti, however, outsmarted the chimpanzees and obtained fire for all his people.

This clever Mbuti studied the ways of the chimpanzees. One day, when the animals went

away on a hunt, he put on a breechcloth and let the tail of the breechcloth hang very low, so that it trailed on the ground. He came to the deserted chimpanzee camp and sat down by the blazing fire. The Mbuti began to talk to the few young animals left behind, and as he talked he edged closer and closer to the fire. Suddenly the tail of his breechcloth burst into flame. With a shout, as though panicked, the Mbuti jumped up and rushed out of the chimpanzee camp. Quickly he ran home and lighted the firewood he had prepared beforehand. Ever since, the Mbuti have had fire, and they gave it to other Pygmy groups too. Later the village people got the fire from the Mbuti by trickery.

The Mbuti also believe that the Creator of men favors the Pygmies. He created children of different skin color and talked to all of them, so they would learn how to live in the world. But the Creator talked to the Pygmy child all the time, which is why the Pygmies are so

much smarter than the rest of the people in the world.

The camp the Pygmies have just abandoned will soon return to jungle. The huts, uncared for, will tumble. Vegetation will cover up the paths. The refuse heaps will rot and form good soil. Soon, to the unpracticed eye, there will be no evidence left at all that people had once joyfully lived there.

The Mbuti band continues on their journey. Even as they walk and chatter, keeping the forest awake and the animals of the forest hiding, everyone is on the lookout for plants and roots, mushrooms and bulbs for the next meal. Perhaps they will collect only vegetables, or they may also find some meat. An ever-vigilant hunter may shoot a small animal—a curious monkey attracted by the noise—or capture a few slow turtles. They will be cut up and shared by the entire camp.

Among the Mbuti sharing is a way of life.

No one in camp ever goes hungry, if there is any food in any household. A woman does not hesitate to share her food, if a child or a neighbor comes over while her family is eating. However, she is not expected to share extra luxuries with others.

Walking in single file, the band finally reaches a clearing that the men decide will make a good camping spot. It is on slightly elevated ground, and there is a stream nearby. Each man selects a spot that appeals to him as the proper site for himself and his family and that is near to his relatives or to the men with whom he likes to hunt. There he puts down his belongings and goes into the forest to cut saplings for his hut.

The women reach the campsite a bit later. Each recognizes her husband's or her father's or her son's possessions and places her bundles from the burden basket atop theirs. Immediately, without sitting down to rest, the women

go off too in search of materials for building a hut. If they hurry, they may have shelter ready and their belongings under cover before the daily rains come.

The younger men in the camp and some of the older men help the women to gather leaves and twigs. The large leaves, some sixteen inches in length, are called *mongongo* and abound in the forest. Each woman knows from experience just how large a bundle she will need. However, everyone gathers extras to help another woman or a bachelor, and to keep her new hut in good repair.

Each family (that is a husband, wife, and their children) has its own separate hut. If a grandmother or grandfather is staying with them, the wife builds an additional hut close to her own and often facing it, so the old people will feel part of the family. Bachelors or widowers build their huts either separately at the edge of the camp or near to a close relative,

depending on how good the relationship is between them. The better they get along, the closer the huts. Two or three bachelors may prefer to share a larger, communal hut. They will build it together and ask a woman to help cover it with the extra *mongongo* leaves she has gathered.

A severely wounded European described how a hut was built right over him, while he lay in pain and unable to move. Two elderly women began working opposite each other. Each selected saplings, some eight feet in height, and pushed them firmly into the ground forming a large circle. They trampled the earth down, then bent, joined, and lashed the opposite tops together with lianas. Next they thrust smaller saplings into the ground between the tall, domed saplings. And, lashing them together, they wove parallel strips of lianas into a network all over the frame, forming a loose, basketlike weave.

When this basketwork was completed, each woman began to hook into the framework the bent stems of the large *mongongo* leaves. The leaves overlapped like shingles. At the top of the round hut, they added an extra layer of these shingles to insure against leakage during rain. A low, rounded opening was left in one side. It was so close to the ground that a man entering had to creep through it.



Since this hut was built for a European, it was made somewhat larger than usual. It was five feet high, instead of four and a half feet, and nine feet in diameter, instead of five feet. The women took less than three hours to erect this shelter. They also wove a sleeping mat quickly and helped the European onto it.

While the women work on the huts, the men relax around the large communal fire they have built in the center of the camp. There they talk, smoke their pipes, and plan the next day's hunt. Hut building is strictly women's work. They take pride in the speed and dexterity with which they make a home for their family. The men merely watch, as they have done for thousands of years, without interfering. When a man does interfere, he may regret doing so.

In the case of the hut that was being built for the European, an elder in the camp, whose wife was one of the builders, watched the two women with an interest that bordered on parti-

cipation. Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he offered a few words of advice to his wife. She disregarded him, even though he had spoken loud enough for everyone to hear. After she continued the hut weaving for a while, her husband spoke again. She replied briefly, evidently explaining her reason for the way she was building the hut.

The second woman did not even look up, but went on working in silence. She had not been addressed and so was not concerned. Work went on. Then the husband spoke for the third time. As he finished, his wife grabbed a bundle of the *mongongo* leaves and ran up behind her husband. With a torrent of angry words, she birched his back several times and retired to her work.

Everyone around the fire tensed and waited in silence. But the elder did not strike back after this unexpected attack. He backed away from the fire and stood calmly and quietly for

a while, surveying the construction. Without another word, he lighted his pipe, walked slowly to the fire again, and sat down on a log among the men. He evidently had not lost face at all. His wife, her temper spent, began to talk cheerfully to her companion as they worked. Soon both women were giggling, but working nonetheless with haste, since the wounded man was obviously in great pain and needed rest.

The Mbuti women are accepted as equals by their menfolk and carry out their jobs with responsibility and grace. Older women are respected as much as older men. The women share in all activities, including hunting, and decisions are made with their participation. Their opinions are given equal consideration. Such customs are unusual in Africa, where the husband is generally the unquestioned master of the household. The wife or wives have to obey for fear of being cruelly beaten and even mutilated. Some Mbuti women are even tem-

pered. Some are not. Their husbands treat them accordingly, if they wish to avoid family quarrels. However, a man who enjoys a scrap can easily get into one, but he well knows that he is fighting an equal.

Adults and children alike do not hide their feelings. If they are happy, the Pygmies dance and sing and talk. If they are unhappy, even grownups cry openly. Anger is not held back either. Each person knows that within the small camp a quarrel may embroil everyone and perhaps even cause a breakup of the band. Yet they do not hesitate to vent their anger in words and action. Fortunately, because of their respect for the older people, they eventually will stop and listen to reason, so peace is restored.

In a Mbuti camp, therefore, anything can happen in the course of a day's work and living together. But quarrels are forgotten as soon as they are over. A person bears no grudges. He

may sulk for a while, thinking that everyone is against him, but when he hears the trill of a flute or the beat of a drum he will not stay away long from the line of dancers. He may even dance next to the person whom he insulted and fought only a short while ago.

On the whole the camp is a happy, busy place. Everyone belongs and has a function. If there is any jealousy or a person offends another, the disagreement is usually aired immediately. The individuals involved speak in loud voices, within earshot of the entire camp. Were anyone to try to hide a quarrel from others, it still would be heard through the leaf-thin walls of the huts. After the two or three people have talked themselves out, they retire to their huts and sleep off the excitement. To bear a grudge or brood in anger is not the Mbuti way.

Since a Mbuti camp is not governed by a chief, there is great respect for the opinion and wisdom of the older men and women. When a

quarrel is prolonged, an older person may step in and quietly, almost apologetically, speak to the people concerned. They usually listen to his judgment. If some of the young people about the camp are too noisy, an older man or woman may speak to them. They will quiet down or move away from the center of the camp, where they will not disturb people who are resting. A successful hunter also earns the camp's respect and is listened to.

Sometimes a quarreling couple may prove a continuous disturbing influence in the camp. In such a case, the men sitting around the campfire at night will talk matters over with the husband and may suggest that he try another camp, among his relatives or hers. Perhaps they will get along better there. Although an ousted person is not readily welcomed into another community, and may even suffer hunger, an additional good hunter is always needed among the Mbuti camps. Often a man does not

get along well hunting with his relatives and prefers to hunt with friends he has met on the trail. In this case, he is free to leave the camp and join another group.

No one in a Mbuti camp feels he has a right to reprimand another person severely, unless he has talked over the problem with some of the men at the campfire. When the misdeed seems to deserve punishment, the camp youths will shake up the man's hut while he is sleeping in the early morning—if only to show the offender that the camp resents his behavior.

Should a person, whether a man or a woman or a youngster, be caught stealing from a hut, the camp will rise in an uproar. Everyone then has a right to vent anger and thrash the thief publicly, so he won't repeat the offense. But no person alone ever punishes a wrongdoer. As in almost every situation, the action is carried out by a group. The offender then will bear resentment against the entire camp, but not against

an individual, which is safer. Although an offender can fight one person, he will hesitate to undertake revenge against all.

Nor could an offender escape by hiding in a friend's hut. No one will accept him. His family, of course, will sympathize with him, weeping and wailing at their misfortune. However, the thief cannot remain in his own hut, since it may be demolished instantly by the angry people.

Should an offender run away, the camp will pursue him, their anger mounting as the distance increases and their exhaustion grows. The frenzy of this anger is such that the Mbuti lose the little self-control they possess. A group of women, for example, were observed chasing a culprit, holding their small kitchen knives ready to slash him. But he outran them and disappeared into the forest. They had to give up the attack. The women became hysterical. They rolled on the wet ground screaming. One

woman wailed that the offender had killed her and she was about to die. Actually he had not even touched her.

For very, very serious offenses, such as a wilful murder or wilful cruelty to a child, husband, or wife, the Mbuti may do nothing at all. The punishment, they believe, will come from God or from the elements in the forest. This silent treatment, which is the worst for a Pygmy to bear, is extremely effective and is a credit to the wisdom of the Mbuti customs. These Pygmies, so quickly moved to laughter, anger, and tears, remain stone silent when most deeply moved.

After a man marries he usually brings his wife to live in his parents' camp, or he may decide to live in her parents' camp and hunt with her brothers. Should the man's own camp be short of hunters, they will ask him to stay with them for a while. Later, when another hunter has joined them or a youth has grown up to replace him, the man feels free to leave.

So there is a constant shifting of population among the camps. People marry, children are born and grow up. Old people die, and newcomers join the camp. A practical limit, however, of six families—more or less—is retained.

By late afternoon the families are sitting on stumps and stools near their new, fresh, green huts. Everyone is in camp. Older boys and girls have returned with wood they gathered for the evening fires. The families talk about the day's events. The young children are still playing in the portion set off as their playground, called their *bopi* (bo-pee), climbing trees and splashing in the stream.

The men and women have been busy all day. The nets are hanging out to dry on branches behind the huts. A man is pounding a large water-soaked piece of inner fig-tree bark over a log to make bark cloth. The beater he uses is an elephant tusk attached to a wooden handle. As he pounds the bark, it thins and spreads out

into a soft, flexible cloth. It may make a new breechcloth for himself or an apron for his wife or a little blanket for a newborn baby. His wife will decorate it with geometric designs. She will prepare the colors (purples, reds, and blacks) from berry and other fruit juices and apply them with her fingers.

Couples are working together making or repairing nets. The women have twisted a large



quantity of vegetable fibers. They will probably need much more before a large net is finished. The older women in the camp help too. Other men are busy whittling arrow shafts. They use triangles cut from the *mongongo* leaves to feather the shafts. Some arrowheads are made of metal. The Pygmies trade with the villagers for them. From the villagers, too, they get metal spearheads and knives. Their



own arrows are fashioned out of wood and hardened over the fire. The points are dipped in a very effective poison, prepared from plants. A mere scratch with a poisoned arrow causes death. The people know how dangerous these arrows are and carry them carefully covered with leaves. They also make sure when shooting a poisoned arrow that no person is in the vicinity.

Some women and girls are weaving baskets. They sit on the ground, on a bundle of leaves, a mat, or a low stool, their legs outstretched. These baskets are the only containers the household owns for carrying its possessions. The tumplines for the burden baskets are made of fiber, spun and plaited by the women. Household goods are few. A cooking pot is indispensable, as well as wood stirrers, which the men have whittled, and gourds for carrying water.

The belts the women make for the men are very elaborate and strong. A hunter always car-

ries a knife, a small axe, a tobacco pipe, and some pouches around his waist. The belt, therefore, must be strong and safe. Some belts are made so skillfully that as many as a hundred fine plaited strands are woven into them. A man fastens his belt by tying the ends securely.

Everyone is fond of ornaments. Necklaces, bracelets, and anklets are made of dried berries, of shell, of pieces of metal and wood. The Pygmies are even fonder of showy store-bought ornaments. Although such articles are quite expensive, a woman will go to a great deal of effort to get a few strands of colorful glass beads.

The time has come from the evening meal. Each woman adds twigs to the small cooking fire burning in front of her hut. She cuts up the vegetables and mushrooms she has gathered on her way to the new camp and drops them all into a pot containing water, a pinch of salt, and perhaps, for flavoring, some peppers she has obtained from a villager outside the forest.



The stew is soon boiling. Earlier she mixed some manioc flour (also an item of village trade) with water and set it in the hut to rise. She now kneads the dough and places it on leaves on the hot coals. It will make biscuits to eat with the stew. Her family either dips the biscuit into the pot or uses leaves and bamboo shoots for plates and spoons.

By our standards their evening meal is not very rich or filling, but the Mbuti are quite satisfied and happy with it. So much so that, after the meal, there is sure to be a dance. The men leave their huts and sit down at the large communal fire in the center of the camp. Someone begins to sing or to play a flute. The men get up and start circling around the fire, shuffling and swaying. The women and girls join by forming a second, outer circle. The two circles move slowly around and around the big fire.

After a time, as the dancers tire, the men return to the fire. One by one the women go to

their huts. At this time the men talk and plan the next day's hunt. The women pick up sleepy children and put them on their mat indoors. The older people creep into their hut too. Some of the younger men retire, since everyone has to be up early for the hunt, while others who do not feel sleepy remain by the fire talking, joking, laughing. Someone inside a hut will shout to them to keep quiet and let people sleep. But the men ignore this interruption. After a while, unable to sleep, a man will return from his hut and join the group by the fire for another smoke and chat. So men keep coming and going most of the night. Some even fall asleep by the fire and spend the entire night there. Next day if anyone is sleepy or tired, he can always catch a nap in the forest.

In the dark, the small fires continue to gleam through the night in front of each hut, keeping out insects and prowling animals. The forest is dark, but its silence is never complete. Noises

of crickets and frogs, calls of nocturnal birds and animals join the sounds of the tired Mbuti camp.

3

Hunting



Mbuti hunters never kill a plant or animal that they will not use. This principle is their rule in hunting. When they have netted enough game for a day or two they return to camp. However, when the game is caught, the Mbuti have no sportsmanlike regard in killing it. They believe that animals exist to be hunted and to be eaten.

Hunting, whether with nets, bows and arrows, or spears, is a joint undertaking. Bowmen go out in pairs or in threes and fours, and they use several dogs. The net hunters need the cooperation of the entire camp, but they may or may not use dogs.

The Pygmy hunting dogs are long-legged, light brown, skinny animals, the size of a terrier. They have thin, curling tails, pointed ears, and no voice. When hunting, the Pygmies tie flat wooden bells to their dogs. These bells sound when game has been located and the dogs start to run, and so alert the hunters. The bells also warn them, before they shoot, that a dog and not an antelope is in the underbrush. The people do not bother naming their dogs; they summon them with a whistle. Nor do they care or provide for the dogs as we do our hunting dogs. Although domesticated, the Pygmy dogs hunt for themselves and keep out of the way when not with the hunters.

Preparations for the hunt are routine. The women rise with the dawn, as always, and go to the stream to bathe and bring back water for cooking and washing. Old people prefer to wash up in front of their huts. While the stew is cooking or warming, the plantains baking in the coals, the women pack their burden baskets for the day and sharpen their knives. They will need food for at least one meal away from home. As her baby awakens, the mother slips a sling over her head and puts the child into it. The baby nurses while she continues her chores.

The men, in the meantime, also get up and go off to bathe. They eat as soon as the food is ready and next prepare their hunting gear. Each long net is quickly inspected and carefully coiled and tied with a series of short ropes, so it can be uncoiled readily when the time comes. Men sharpen their knives and axes, and slip them into their belt. They pick up their bow, test the bowstring, again inspect the

quiver of poison arrows, and are ready to depart.

Young men, who as yet have no nets of their own, are helpers for the older hunters with nets. The youths leave first, but some may stay to help an older hunter carry his net. Not far from the camp, the young men stop and with a few embers from the community fire start a small fire under a large tree. Its purpose is to warm the forest, to tell it that they are going hunting, and to ask for a successful hunt. As pairs of hunters, their nets slung over their shoulders, approach the special fire, they pause in silence for a moment and walk on. The groups of women who follow the men do the same. But the silence is only momentary. Talk and calls resume, since the band keeps in touch this way. A straggler or a woman who has wandered off the trail to gather plants listens to the voices and will not get lost.

Any child who wishes to join the hunt may

do so. Younger children generally keep close to their mother. Older children prefer to stay in groups with their own age-mates, but they must obey the rules of the hunt and help. A child who wants to remain in camp can do so. The older people will take care of him. The children left behind can play all day in their playground. If there is no food in their hut, the older people will prepare something for them.



When the hunters walking ahead see a movement in the trees or on the ground, they signal to those behind them, and everyone falls silent, moving cautiously (as only Pygmies can) without making a sound. The signals are imitation bird or animal calls, which are not likely to disturb the game.

The men and boys begin to spread their nets in a semicircle. The nets are not laid *on* the



ground; they are hung over low bushes and saplings *above* the ground. Each net is about four feet high, just high enough so that a man can carry it over his shoulders, but they may be as long as 300 feet. When several nets are spread out, therefore, they cover an area of considerable size. Too large an area, the Mbuti have found, is hard for them to control and coordinate, so a limit is placed on the number of nets used in a hunt.

The most experienced hunter now takes his stand, facing the center, some distance away from the outspread nets. The other hunters alongside of him crouch in the undergrowth. Opposite them women and children, having formed a line of beaters, stand ready behind the nets. A hunter, imitating an animal call, breaks the silence, and the beaters begin to slap at the undergrowth about them to confuse the game further.

The Pygmies are hoping for antelopes, which

are easiest to net. There are some eighteen different kinds of antelopes in the Ituri forest. The light brown, small-horned bushbucks and the hare-sized duikers are most common. A single duiker does not furnish much meat, but if several are caught the camp can have a feast. The okapi, something of a cross between an antelope and a giraffe, is large game and very desirable. It has big donkey ears and a long tail, and it feeds in early morning and late afternoon. Like the other animals of the forest, the okapi is a dark, red-brown color. The upper forelegs, haunches, and thighs are striped black and white. This coloring camouflages the animals and makes them hard to detect in the leafage. The okapi have a keen sense of hearing and smell, and so are a prize catch, challenging the Pygmy hunter's ingenuity.

There are also forest hogs, which live in groups and are ground feeders. Sometimes the hunters net an old boar that, like an aging ele-

phant, likes to wander alone and is found in the open. Usually, however, the old boars have learned hunters' tricks and are hard to get.

Soon, curious about the noises, the heads of two antelopes poke out from among the bushes. Immediately the women begin to beat the ground and shout. Frightened, the antelopes leap into the open space of the drawn nets and become entangled. The circle of hunters moves inward, and the two center hunters shoot the antelopes.

The wives of the hunters who did the actual shooting immediately come over with their burden baskets, ready to stuff the cut-up game into them. A larger animal is carried to camp on a young man's shoulders.

Not all hunts are over so soon. When nothing happens after the nets are spread out, they are coiled again and carried to another place, where the same hunting procedure is followed. On some hunts the nets may have to be spread

several times before any game is caught. Sometimes, after so much effort, people return to camp empty-handed. The plants the women have gathered then make up the evening meal, and a hunt is planned for the next day or the day after.

The meat in camp is divided according to custom. This division varies among different Pygmy groups. Some present the head to an elder, to give him wisdom. Others allot it to a sister of the successful hunter or to a sister-in-law or to a dog. Sometimes the head is saved for the best hunter while the stomach is set aside for the elders or for a woman. The animal's back may be the reward of the hunter, to give him strength, or go to the person who carried the carcass back to camp.

Often the hunters and their families divide into groups and wander off into different parts of the forest. One group may be lucky, and it returns with game. The others may return

empty-handed. They are depressed when they see the full cooking pots of the fortunate group, but there is always enough meat for all. Even though the choicest parts disappear quickly, the entire camp will have meat.

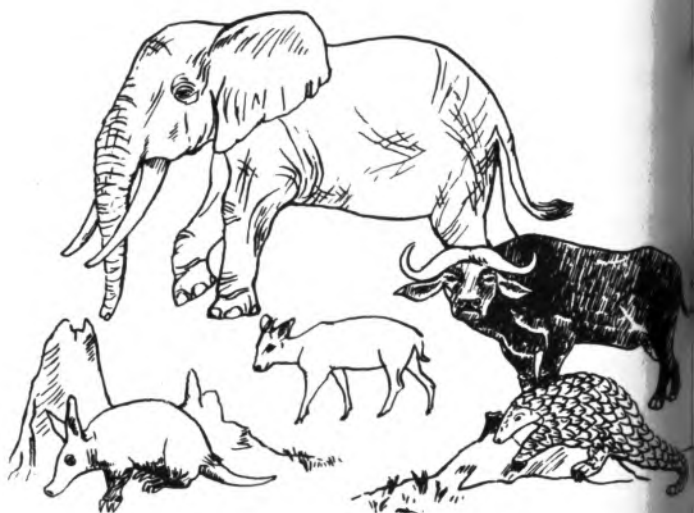
Yet, despite this readiness to share and the custom-set procedure of division, there is always some grumbling from a housewife. Either her share is too small, or she received meat she and her family dislike. This complaint may lead to quarrels and some angry outbursts for a while. Some women even try to snatch and throw pieces of meat into their burden baskets while no one is watching. Such behavior is greeted with loud reprimands. But matters get settled, and all is quiet while people eat and enjoy the fruits of their hunt.

The pattern of hunting changes as the makeup of the band changes. When an older hunter retires, his place is taken by the one next in expertise. The Mbuti readily acknowledge

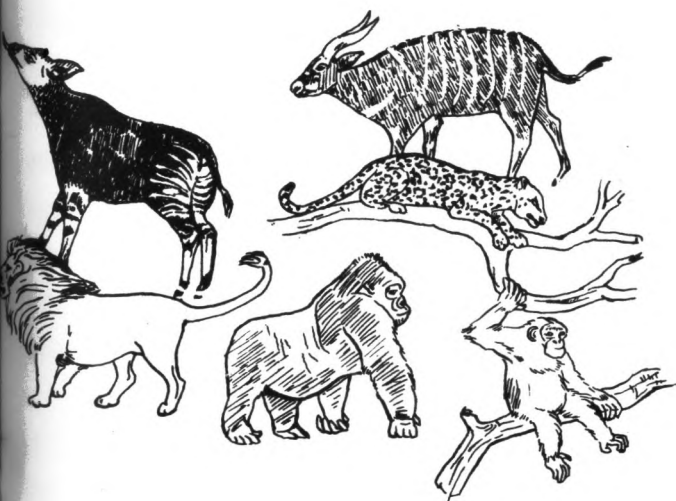
a good hunter and give him priority and respect. On the other hand, a man who is very successful on the hunt and nets more game than others will often retire even while still young and able. He does not want people to envy him, and he does not especially enjoy being foremost. He may begin to go out alone or with a companion and a dog, as older men are wont to do, and let someone else in the camp gain the experience and enjoy good luck.

The Pygmies are not great believers in magic and are not as superstitious as their village neighbors. However, some hunters do smear on their body a paste of ashes mixed with certain parts of the animal they plan to hunt, in the hope that the animal will come to them. This practice harms no one and gives the hunter confidence. Of course, after a successful hunt, the hunter may feel sure that the magic helped. The fire the young men lighted before the hunt is, in a way, magic, too. They try to

awaken the forest and warm it, so it will favor them with good hunting. When they see no game at all, they believe the forest is asleep and does not know her children are out hunting. Among the northern Pygmies the older people who remain in camp during a hunt keep a fire going all day. When game is brought in, it is placed first within a marked circle by the fire as thanks to the forest before it is cut up.



Larger game than an antelope is always in the minds and hopes of the hunters. The dwarf buffalo of the Ituri forest is small compared to its relatives of East Africa. It stands only about three and a half feet high at the shoulders instead of five feet high. Its horns are shorter and incurved (an evident adaptation of this forest dweller), and the bulbous enlargement at the base of the horns is entirely absent. Once the



dwarf buffalo, which has good sight and keen hearing, was quite numerous; now it is rarer.

When a buffalo is sighted and, confused by the noise, heads toward the nets, the hunters rush to get the nets down. In its frenzy the beast is likely to tear them badly. If it gets entangled, however, they hasten to spear it. Now there will be enough meat for everyone and more for trading.

The forest elephant is also built on a smaller scale than his relatives in the African grasslands. It has rounder and smaller ears, five toes instead of four on its forefeet, and four toes instead of three on its hind feet. These differences, too, are evidently a forest adaptation. The Pygmies hunt the elephant for its meat. Its tusks never have meant much to the Pygmies who use them for bark beaters or trade them.

Reports that an elephant or elephants have been sighted is wonderful news, indeed. The

net hunters turn into spearmen, who will stalk and kill—and perhaps be killed themselves. The special spear a man uses is a wide piece of metal about eight inches long and four inches wide. The hunter has worked the blade to a razor sharpness; its shaft is as tall as he is.

The hunter hides in the bushes. When the elephant appears, he jumps up and thrusts his spear into the elephant's belly. As the animal turns in pain, the hunter speeds away so the elephant cannot see him. Were the elephant to detect a movement, it would surely charge and trample the hunter to death. Of course, this too occurs. As the elephant moves again, the spearman jabs it over and over. The elephant charges forward with several painful wounds in its stomach, leaving a trail of blood and intestines behind it.

Back at camp, the spearman reports the good tidings that he has killed an elephant. The entire camp packs up and moves to the place

where the elephant finally dropped dead. When they reach the carcass, men scramble with machetes and axes to cut and chop hunks of meat, which their wives cook on the spot. All gobble together till they can hold no more.

News of the killing often reaches other camps, and people come to ask for meat. They are not turned away empty-handed. Some of the meat is laid out to dry and is later used to trade for produce with the villagers. The ivory is usually exchanged for luxuries and will buy metal spearpoints and arrows.

Monkeys are also a desirable catch, and so are the hyraxes and pangolins, although they do not yield as much or as tasty meat as the monkeys. Both the forest hyrax and the pangolin are tree dwellers, and they are hunted with bow and arrow. The hyrax feeds at night and fills the forest with its grunting and weird, wailing screams. The pangolin, rolled into a ball and hanging from a branch by its tail, looks

like a hanging plant from a distance. Covered by armorlike scales, it resembles our armadillo and like it is an ant eater. The aardvarks, too, are ant eaters and live in burrows. Boys and women hunt for them.

All small animals of the forest, including turtles and rodents, are hunted. Birds are fair game for youngsters and older people, too. Often they are the camp's only meat for the big evening meal. After they shoot down birds with their blunt arrows, the Mbuti children play with the living bird, singeing its feathers over the fire, twisting its neck till it dies.

Gathering honey is another eventful time. The Pygmies are extremely fond of honey. It is, indeed, a good food for them, high in sugar and energy content. The honey season comes in midyear and lasts only two months. During this time all other hunting is neglected or else followed irregularly, so people can concentrate on getting honey.

The Mbuti search for beehives in hollow

trunks or on thick branches, high up in the trees, and so they must do expert climbing. Having climbed trees many times as youngsters on their playground, the Mbuti have no difficulty. Some honey, which the women search for and scoop up, is found in tree trunks close to the ground.

At honey-getting time the Mbuti break up



into small family groups to search for beehives. The trunks of the very tall trees are so thick they are hard to climb. The Mbuti get up with the aid of vines. Once they reach the treetops, they leap from one branch to another.

When a man has reached a beehive, he smokes the bees out. Then he chips away with his axe to enlarge the hole, fearlessly plunges his hand and arm in, scoops up a handful of the dripping honey and comb, and stuffs it into his mouth. Afterward he begins to consider his family and friends waiting below and throws them a few fistfuls. The Mbuti are not afraid of bees. They claim that their bees' sting is not too painful. If a man cannot carry away all the honey at one time, he and his friends tie a vine around the tree trunk to show their ownership. No one will touch that tree.

The return to camp with burden baskets full of honey is noisy with singing and dancing. The honey, still in the comb, is freely shared

with everyone. Different kinds of honey have different flavors. Some is liquid and has a fermented flavor. Honey with twigs and leaves in it is warmed in a pot and placed in a sieve. The pure honey is allowed to drip through and is consumed immediately.

That evening the camp is filled with the happy songs of the honey festival and the honey-gathering dance. In this dance, men form one line and the women another. While the women dance and imitate the buzzing of bees, the line of men dancers enact the finding of a beehive. As the men touch the women bees to get the honey, they are swished with burning twigs, so the sparks will sting them as bees do.

The honey dance may be followed by a tug-of-war. Men make up one side and women the other. The men being heavier and stronger usually win, which evens up the score after the honeybee dance.

Another occasion for hunting is when ter-

mites appear. The termites are brown insects that build cone-shaped hives. When the Mbuti come across a series of these hills, they organize a termite hunt. A family selects a termite hill for itself, builds a roof of leaves over it, and digs a circular ditch around it. They set a tiny fire at the base of each nest and cover it with damp leaves. As the leaves begin to smoke, the termites emerge by the thousands. Flying upward, they hit the roof the Mbuti have built and fall into the shallow ditches. The family scoops them up and puts them into baskets. Each nest yields several pounds of termites. People mount them on long sticks, grill them over the fire, and eat them on the spot. They make a crisp brown, rich food that tastes, I am told, like a mixture of lobster and mushrooms—with a touch of sand.

The forest is a good provider, but one has to work at getting food. There are plentiful bulbous roots, mushrooms, nuts, and berries. Food

gathering goes on all the time. As people walk through the forest, they pick up edible plants. The women always carry burden baskets, which get filled daily. The men, too, gather vegetables. They wrap them in leaves and tie the bundle or bundles to their belt. On long journeys even the men may carry burden baskets.

Always, when walking in the forest, the groups of Pygmies talk and laugh and call to one another. The wild animals, even the elephant, buffalo, and leopard, prefer to stay out of the way of this human noise and will not attack, unless they are attacked first. Animals and men share the forest with each other.

4

Growing Up



The Mbuti as well as other Pygmy groups want many children. They love them, and everyone in camp readily assumes responsibility for them. Men fondle their children, carry them about in camp, play with them, and talk to them, which is the equivalent of teaching them. Kindness and attention are not lavished

on one's own children only. Every child in the camp receives the same consideration.

A child is born in the forest with the help of a midwife, usually an older woman, or any other woman, such as a sister, who happens to be near at the time. There are as yet no modern medicines for the mother and child. But there are many herbal drinks, specially prepared, and many plant foods that the Mbuti believe will ease childbirth and help the growth of the baby. If a woman is in great pain during labor, she may ask to be taken away from the camp, carried into the forest, and placed with her back against a tree trunk. The midwife remains in attendance, massaging her and soothing her with reassurances that all will be well. The forest will help. The forest wants children and loves them.

The husband is not permitted to be near his wife during childbirth. Nor is anyone except for the attendant or attendants allowed to be

present. He hears her cries of pain and is concerned, but must keep out of sight. However, when his child is born, the umbilical cord must be cut with the father's knife.

Within two or three hours after birth (the Mbuti do not tell time by hours, days, weeks, months, and years, as we do, but by the sun and moon instead), the mother is up and about snuggling her infant in its fresh bark blanket. If the birth takes place while the people are on a hunt, one or two women stay behind with the mother and join the group later. The mother soon is able to walk and carry the infant herself.

At camp, the new mother will go about her daily tasks. The father at times carries the infant about, showing it off. His friends make the same comments that we make on seeing an infant: "How cute." "How big." "How beautiful." "Looks like his father." "Looks like his mother." "Looks just like his sister, when she

was born." "Never saw such a beautiful baby before." An older man or woman will offer to hold the infant, while sitting about the camp-fire, and let the mother and father dance in the evening to celebrate the birth.

In a few days, if the baby does well and is believed to have "come to stay," the parents give it a name. The Mbuti infants are as a rule



healthy. Fewer die than those African babies born in villages. However, Pygmy families remain small.

The mother sings her child to sleep, making up her own words. She may retell in song what happened during her day's food gathering, what she saw in the forest. She may praise the child in a phrase and make up a tune to fit the words. Such a lullaby is the mother's alone for her baby. All women sing to their children in their own way and temperament. As a girl grows up she, in turn, will invent lullabies for her baby brother, recalling how her mother sang her to sleep.

After some weeks the infant's sister or another little girl in the camp will care for him. At first, she may stay close to the hut and to the baby's mother, since the baby has to be nursed when he cries. But as the infant grows and can sit up in a sling, the little girl will take him to the children's playground. She is glad to look

after him, for now she has a real child with whom to play house.

When the child begins to speak, he will call the little girl and all the other little girls, sister. All the boys, he will call brother. The women in camp are addressed as Ema, mother, and the men as Epa, father. Old people are known as Tata, grandparent. The child knows, of course, who his real (blood) parents are, and his real brother and sister, since they share the same home with him.

The Mbuti are very kind and affectionate with each other. A child finds protection from everyone in camp. Anyone will feed and care for him, even if not related to his family. The youngster soon learns that he is welcome in every hut and that whoever sees him in trouble will run to him at his cry. If he gets too close to the fire, an older child will pull him away. An adult will grab a child and spank him so he will remember to stay away from this danger. Fire

is, indeed, a danger that is never completely overcome. Even adults who fall asleep by the fire at night may lose their balance and burn to death, unless someone pulls them away in time.

The children's playground, their *bopi*, is located in the cool shade beside a shallow running stream. It is far enough away from the camp so the noise will not annoy the old people, who may want to rest and sleep during the day. Older boys and girls also play on the playground when they have time. The younger ones learn from them how to climb trees and swing on the vines. They make up all sorts of hanging tricks using either hands or feet.

When they are young, children learn to jump. Several of them are lifted up a young tree and as its branches lower under their weight, they jump. Sometimes a slower child fails to take off with the others. The tree then swings back into position, leaving the boy high

up in the air. Everyone laughs and teases him. The next time the game is repeated, he is the first to jump. Older boys are able to swing on a branch, like a pendulum, and leap onto a nearby tree.

To watch a Mbuti man nimbly climb a 200-foot tree for honey, with merely a few vines to support him makes one think that the skill is inborn. Actually, his ability is not acquired that easily. Although the Mbuti have no fear of heights, they learn to climb by playing and swinging among the saplings in the camp playground.

All boys practice with small bows and blunt arrows, aiming at everything in the forest: leaves, plants, and birds. A youngster whose father or grandfather has not yet made a bow for him cooperates and helps an older playmate. He will pick up his friend's arrows for him, so eventually his friend will let him have a turn with the bow.

The Pygmies are not known as especially good marksmen. They do not have to excel in this ability. Among those bands that hunt with nets, shooting at game after it is caught and entangled does not require marksmanship. When the men use spears to kill large game, they rely on their small size and nimbleness to plant the weapon successfully. Furthermore, visibility is so poor in the forest that a hunter can aim a bow and arrow with certainty for only about twenty yards. Beyond that distance he may never know what caused the movement he observed.

Among the net-hunting groups, the children pick up pieces of torn net and play at netting a piece of wood—an imaginary antelope—which is then shot with their arrows or speared with a stick. The silent camp dogs are sometimes enmeshed in the pieces of netting and are dragged triumphantly into camp as game. An older boy, or even an old man, often consents

to play antelope for the children. They throw the net fragment over him and with much merriment capture him. Old men, in fact, take great pleasure in playing with the boys and training them. Even an experienced hunter often plays antelope with his youngsters. He imitates realistically the leaping of an antelope while the children pursue him and at last catch him in the net. All roll on the ground exhausted and gleeful.

Little girls watch and imitate their mother as she plaits a basket. They pile twigs to resemble a fire and cook food, throwing into the fire the wooden antelope a boy playmate has brought back to camp.

Although the Mbuti enjoy singing and dancing daily, they have very few lengthy celebrations that call for much preparation. One of the important ceremonies they do observe is the Elima (Eh-lee-mah), which marks a girl's coming of age. After participating in the Elima,

a girl is considered grown up, ready for marriage.

A native Mbuti ceremony although the name comes from the villages, the Elima is a joyous festival. For the parents, it means that they have successfully raised a daughter, who will marry soon and bear children. To the rest of the camp, it brings more singing and dancing and festivities. If two or three girls are involved, the occasion is all the more enjoyable. The parents announce proudly that their daughters are ready. When several girls participate, they are called Bamelima. *Ba* is a plural form. The girls choose companions from among the unmarried women or from women who have had no children as yet. These companions stay with the Bamelima girls throughout the ceremonies.

The girls' mothers decide among themselves where to build the special Elima hut in which the girls will live during the ceremony. The

hut in no way differs from the others in camp, except that for a while its leaves will appear fresher and it will look newer. Thus it stands out from among the more worn huts in the rest of the camp. The girls and their companions remain inside the hut. When they go out, the girls always must be with their chosen companions. These companions, however, are free to come and go as their needs arise. Food for the Bamelima group is provided by the girls' mothers.

Inside the hut the girls are given instructions in the ways of womanhood, adult behavior, and marriage relationships. For example, a married woman must not speak to her father-in-law. Later, as she gets older and has her own marriageable daughter, she must never speak to her son-in-law. A young husband, in turn, has to disregard his mother-in-law and, therefore, must not speak about her. These social avoidances help to keep peace in camp and avoid

quarrels among the relatives who share a household.

Much of what these girls learn during the Elima is not new to them. Living in a closely knit group, they have had ample opportunity to observe adult behavior. However, the emphasis of the Bamelima talks is to show them that such behavior is regulated by custom and must be respected.

Girls are also instructed about pregnancy and childbirth, and they are told how to care for an infant. This information, too, is familiar to most of them. A girl must know what herbs will insure good health for the family and what food will give her more milk to nurse her baby. She must learn that she and her husband should refrain from eating meat if the hunting has been unsuccessful. They must help the older people. They must be kind to all children. Never hurt a child.

During the long days in the Elima hut, the

instructions are repeated several times so the girls will remember them. There are no cook-books or books of etiquette for a Mbuti young person to use as reference. In any case, the Pygmies as yet do not read or write. But a girl (or boy) is welcome to ask questions at any time, and no adult will hold back an answer, if he knows it.

The Bamelima are not serious all the time, however. There is much joking and giggling in the hut and at the special place set aside for their bathing. From time to time the girls take a walk around the camp and go into the playground to play with the children. Their companions are always with them, of course.

After the ceremony has gone on for a while, the girls are taught the special Elima songs. Like other Mbuti singing, the words are simple and few. The tunes are simple, too, but importance is attached to their performance. Having learned the songs, the Bamelima go out into the

forest and sing to it. These walks give an older woman the occasion to point out the special herbs to gather and to instruct in their use. Sometimes a new song is coined. A girl may exclaim at something and her musical cry is caught up by the others, who repeat it and stop to listen for the echo. The echo sounds to them as though the forest is speaking. They sing the phrase again and again, listening for the forest's reply. In the crowded, dense vegetation the echo seems to come faster, and the Bam-elima feel as though the forest is really singing to them.

Women sing the Elima songs that they learned as maidens only on special occasions. Sometimes they sing them when they are out food gathering in a small group. They are then singing to the forest too.

At the end of the Elima celebration the confinement to the huts is ended. The girls are now able to go out by themselves, with or without

their companions. During this two-week period a maiden enjoys the most freedom and fun she will ever have. She can do what she pleases and go where she wants without restrictions. The girls plan their activities together.

Firstly, and now as grown women, they want to make themselves attractive. They wear very little clothing, just a soft, decorated apron of bark or bright cotton. But each tries to make a striking impression by the designs she has painted in white clay on her body. Often these designs cover the entire body, front and back, with ringlets, dots, triangles, and wavy lines that extend to the neck and face. To be thoroughly attractive, they have their front teeth filed to fine points. Every young woman naturally dons beaded necklaces, shell necklaces, and any bracelets and anklets she can get. Quite beautiful, the maidens set out to conquer the world.

Among the Mbuti, a girl selects a boy friend in quite a forthright manner. The Bamelima,



all painted and each carrying a liana whip, come out of their hut. They stroll through the camp, eyeing the young men who are lounging about and, in turn, eyeing them. Having chosen a youth with whom she would like to spend the evening, the girl swings her whip at him. Custom dictates that this invitation must be accepted by the youth. To be ignored and refused would be too great an insult to the girl.

Accordingly, when evening comes, the youths who have been whipped call at the Elima hut. There they have to undergo the scrutiny of the companions and of the girls' mothers, who strike each youth with twigs and pebbles. The mothers, especially, are careful about whom their daughter has selected. If the young man happens to be a close relative of her husband, he will never gain entry into the hut. A girl must not marry into her father's family, and the mother prefers to nip in the bud any romance that might develop between the youth

and her daughter. An acceptable youth, however, is lashed a few more times and is finally admitted into the hut. Very often these meetings between the young people lead to marriages.

The girls may also go unchaperoned for walks in the woods. There they may meet some young men from other camps, whip them, and thus have them come to the Elima hut that evening. Some girls even wander into other camps, flirt with the boys, and get them to return the visit.

On other nights, during the last two weeks of the Elima festival, the girls paint and oil themselves and dance at the communal fire, singing their Elima songs. The girls are welcome to dance by the fire, in the evenings, as other women do. When the Elima is over, they continue to dress up for the evening and dance, but they no longer sleep in a special hut. Instead they sleep in their own home.

During the day each maiden helps her mother as before. She cares for the smaller children, helps with the cooking, carries in firewood and *mongongo* leaves, and gathers food in a burden basket. Marriage comes as an anticlimax to all this celebration and attention. There is no special marriage ceremony.

Shortly after the Elima, a young man, who has proved himself as a hunter and thus able to support a wife and children, speaks to the maiden's parents and asks for her in marriage. The parents know their daughter's mind and will say yes, if he is acceptable to her. The young man brings the parents an antelope he has killed or some meat from his recent hunt as a gift. If he is from the same camp, the girl builds a hut the following day and the couple move in. If he is from another camp, they decide whether they wish to live near his people or near the bride's relatives. A man prefers to remain in his father's camp. If the decision

goes his way, the girl packs up her belongings in a burden basket and follows her husband. In all likelihood, his parents have already been making a net for him, so he can take his place among his people as a full-fledged hunter.

Since the Mbuti want children, they do not consider a marriage permanent until the couple have had their first child. The couple then must remain married, because they are now parents and have the responsibility to care for and love their child. Should the union prove childless, the pair may wish to continue living together, because they love each other. However, no one objects to their parting and seeking new mates in order to have a child. Thus a person makes his marriage successful in the eyes of his people. The first wife may return to her people, but more likely a man from her husband's camp will be glad to marry her.

The rules about a second marriage differ from those applying to a first marriage. If the

man wishes to marry a girl from the same camp as his first wife, he must get the consent not only of her parents, but of the older men. Accordingly, the men discuss at the communal fire the young man's proposal and make the decision for or against letting him have another girl from their camp. Very often their decision hinges on whether the man has a sister or another close female relative who will be willing to marry one of their young men. In this way, the camp will not lose two women, which may be an important consideration if there is a shortage of marriageable women in the band.

In the old days, no such ceremony as the Elima was held to mark the entrance of a boy into manhood. Nowadays, due to outside influence, a ritual called the Nkumbi (En-koom-bee) is observed, but it takes place within the villages. This ceremony for boys is not of Mbuti origin. It has been imposed upon the Mbuti boys by the villagers, who maintain that unless

a boy has been circumcised he will never be a man and cannot be treated by them as a man. The Mbuti parents consent to this custom, even though the ceremony holds no meaning for them, because they do not want their boy to be looked down upon by the villagers.

The Nkumbi ceremony is performed on pairs of boys. A Mbuti child, between eight and ten years old, and a village child, between nine and twelve years old, are circumcised together. The same knife is used by a village medicine man for the pair, so that a blood tie will exist between the two boys. This union is intended to last for a lifetime, and the boys must always help each other.

The villagers, who practice ancestor worship, believe that when a circumcised Mbuti attached to their household dies his spirit will join the spirits of their ancestors and serve them in the other world. The Pygmies have no such beliefs. To them, death is final.

Were the circumcision a less painful experience, the Mbuti might resent it less. However, the Mbuti youngster, who has known only kindness and loving care all his life, is now given strict orders to lie still on a cot among strange boys. Masked villagers, who are part of the ceremony, come in to shout, growl, and whip him. A Mbuti father or uncle usually insists on staying with the boy to comfort him during the night after the visitors leave. Still, he is frightened, and some Mbuti boys have sickened and died after the experience. Most of them, though, have borne it through to the end and performed the dances required of them in the village.

Once among his own people, the boy is helped to forget his painful experience. His parents, older men and women, welcome him to sit on their lap as he has before. Within a few years, he will acquire enough experience to stand with the men and net and shoot his first

antelope. He will take part in spearing a buffalo or an elephant. These deeds are the ones that prove manhood. He is a hunter and, therefore, a man.

5

The Molimo



The Molimo ceremony has been described by eyewitnesses in great detail, and it appears to be one of the most beautiful rituals developed by a people. A memorial honoring the Pygmy dead, the Molimo is both a band's farewell to a beloved old person and a thank-you to the life-giving forest for its benevolence and abun-

dance. A person born in the forest, who lived long and happily in it, is now gone forever and must be forgotten as soon as grief permits. The Molimo helps the people to forget.

Not all deaths call forth the Molimo. The decision to hold the ceremony is made by the band when they feel one is needed to restore the camp's happiness and stability. Perhaps the hunting has been poor, or couples have been quarreling in the camp, or a few bad accidents have occurred in succession. The forest must be awakened and reminded that its children need help.

When a person falls seriously ill and does not respond to their herbal medication, there is an immediate fear that he may die. Known remedies are all tried. If the ailment is a stomachache, the patient drinks various herbal concoctions and is given enemas. Herbs are used in these enemas too. Headaches, toothaches, earaches, eye troubles are also cured with

various medications made out of plants. The patient is questioned at length as to whether he ate something that is taboo for his clan and which he is supposed to avoid.

There are not many taboos among these people, but amidst their clan legends some prohibitions exist. Most of the taboos apply to the various kinds of antelopes, although the Mbuti never eat chimpanzees or leopards. So perhaps the patient ate the meat of a prohibited antelope. If so, he will die, because there is no cure for breaking a taboo. If he does not die, he clearly has not broken a taboo.

The clan restrictions are not permanent. A young person moves away, marries into another clan, and within a generation or two the original clan taboos are forgotten. The children and grandchildren may take on customs from the people they live with or they may develop others based on personal experience. If an animal gives a person a stomachache more than

once, he will tell his clan not to eat it. Eventually the advice grows into a taboo. In the same way, a woman may avoid picking a certain plant, because to her knowledge it made someone sick. For example, rigid observances about mushrooms are necessary since the poisonous varieties are fatal.

No one can predict whether an ailing person will recover or die. So people are prepared for the worst. The immediate family and relatives, of course, show the most grief. Some close friends, on learning that a person is very ill and may be dying, rush into his hut and throw themselves beside him, wailing and screaming.

News of the illness is rushed to other camps where the patient has close relatives and friends. These people drop whatever they are doing and begin their moaning, wailing, and crying, as they rush through the forest to their relative's camp. There they throw themselves beside him with much activity and noise. The sadness of

these mourners affects other people in different ways. Some begin to wail in sympathy; others find the proceedings funny. They feel free to laugh aloud and joke among themselves. No one is offended; no one shushes them or tells them to laugh elsewhere, as we would do under similar circumstances.

The mourning for a person continues from the onset of his illness till he dies. After death, the wailing lasts for a short while only. The body is put into a shallow grave or left right on the bed. The hut is then pulled down. The band quickly packs its belongings and abandons the campsite. Very few things are buried with the dead; most of them are divided among the members of the immediate family. Some are given to friends and relatives. When a man dies, his son inherits his net, so he can hunt for the family. When a woman dies, her daughter inherits her cooking pot and her knife—the two essential possessions of every Mbuti woman.

The dead person, henceforth, is never mentioned by name. Everyone tries to forget him.

Actually, the Mbuti ask very little of the forest, just as they ask very little of their creator. All they want is life and enough game and plants to eat. They do not mind walking for miles with heavy nets and burden baskets to get food. The forest is good. Their God is good, too. No one ever questions why a person has to die. Rather the sorrow of the Pygmy is that the dead man, woman, or child will no longer be able to enjoy living, working, hunting, singing, and dancing.

At the new camp, after a few days of working, and hunting, the men may begin to discuss the need for a Molimo ceremony. The discussions are secret and take place late at night, after the women have gone to bed. Neither women nor children are permitted outside their huts during the nights when the Molimo is held.

Asleep in their huts, the women and children suddenly are awakened by the singing of the Molimo. It takes them by surprise. The children cling to their mothers in the dark. The voices of the Molimo are many and strange. The sounds they make seem nonhuman, yet they are beautiful, long, calls. Some are like animals lowing, others like the chirping and singing of birds, and still others like the growling of a leopard. Some sounds remind the children of the wind blowing in the treetops before a rain or a high-pitched woman's voice, echoed by the forest.

Now comes the loud singing of the men around the communal fire. The songs are in praise of the forest. The Molimo voices echo each phrase, as though the forest were talking to her people. These Molimo songs, like all other Pygmy songs, are very simple. They are tunes rather than words, and men make up words that occur to them as they sing. They

keep repeating the words and tune till someone else introduces a new phrase.

The voices of the Molimo keep coming from different directions as the young men carry the trumpet about on the outskirts of the camp. The children, listening to them, think that many beings out there in the dark are singing to them. No one ever tells the child that the Molimo is a long hollow young tree (occasionally a metal pipe nowadays) used as a trumpet. Between the nights of the ceremony, the young men in the camp hide the trumpet in the woods. They bring it out after dark, when all the women and children are safely tucked into their huts and will not see it. All sorts of warnings are given to the women and children to stay within their huts. Yet many women know the truth—that the Molimo is being blown by an especially skillful man from their camp. Many have even memorized Molimo songs, having heard them often enough. On special

occasions, women are permitted to sing these songs with the men.

As the boys grow up, some of them become responsible for safeguarding the Molimo and so learn its secret. For the present, however, it is a wondrous mystery to them, but not at all frightening. The dark is suddenly crowded with strange sounds. Their fathers are joyfully singing together at the fire, unafraid because the voices of the forest can bring only good to its people.

The Molimo lasts for many nights. The rule is that no man may fall asleep while the Molimo is present, although some older men cannot stay awake to the end. This weakness is excusable, but a younger man who falls asleep runs the risk of having his hut flattened by the young men who are the Molimo's escorts. People say that a person asleep by the fire may even be speared and burned on the spot. His family will be told the next day that the Molimo

killed him. However, this threat may be just talk to impress the younger men and make them stay awake.

A few men, tired from the day's hunt, may take a chance and sneak away for a nap. Some are found out; others are not. After the ceremony is over, while the men sit and talk around the campfire, they may bring up to a boastful hunter that he could not stay awake even during the Molimo. This taunt shames him into silence, unless he has an equally disgraceful tale to tell about the accuser. The exchange may start a quarrel, cause shouts, and waken everyone in camp. But the people, impulsive as they are, soon get over it and again all is peace and harmony.

At the beginning and end of the night's singing, the Molimo is dipped into the stream for a drink. The escort of young men who carry the dripping trumpet rush with it to the fire to dry it. Everyone participates. Men scoop up



warm ashes with their hands and rub the trumpet, as it is held on the young men's shoulders high over the fire. The escorts quickly disappear into the dark, carrying the Molimo away to its hiding place.

During the day, a few young men have gone around the camp collecting food in special baskets for the meal that follows the evening's singing. Women still remain inside their huts,

asleep now that the Molimo has stopped for the night. All the men must partake of the food. It may be boiled vegetables and mushrooms, or roasted plantains, depending on what the housewives had to spare that day. After the meal, the men dance and gradually disperse. Some, too sleepy to go to their huts, fall asleep by the dying fire.

The energetic youths arise early the following morning and begin to blow the Molimo in the forest nearby. Exasperated men poke their head through the openings of their hut and yell good-naturedly to the Molimo: "Animal, go away. Go away. Let us sleep." But the Molimo continues calling, and the men reluctantly get up and start about their day's work. The women prepare the small morning meal. Children go off to their playground or hang around their hut, watching the men get ready to depart for the day.

Everyone believes that the voice of the Mol-

imo has awakened the forest. Now the forest is watching over its people, so no harm can come to any of them. A person has an accident only because the forest is asleep at the particular moment.

Toward the end of the Molimo ceremony, the women are permitted to come out of their hut at night. The children, however, still remain inside. According to custom, the women build their own fire, but they dance near the men. The maidens paint and decorate themselves for the occasion.

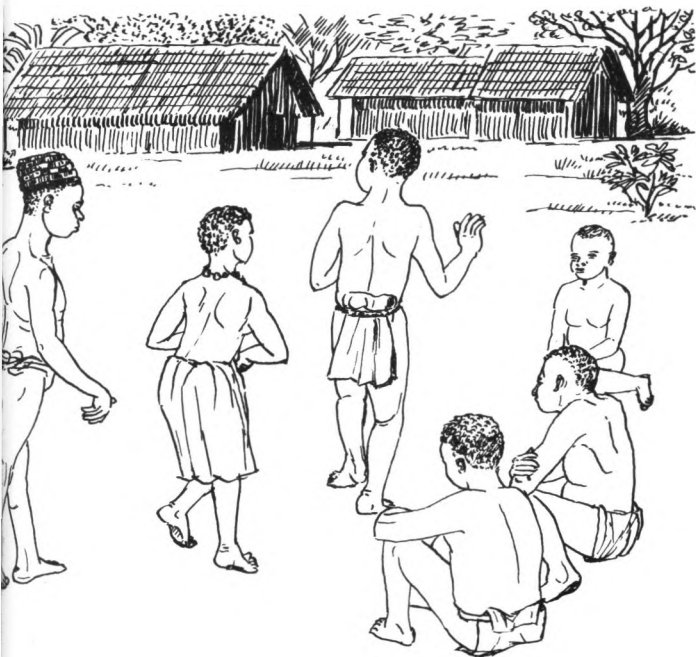
At this point in the festival, the Mbuti may take the Molimo out of the forest to their neighboring village. The Mbuti have saved up dried and smoked meat. They now load their baskets and start the trip. Their living quarters in the village are usually the dustiest grounds and most tumbledown huts. Since there is no place for the children to play indoors, they are allowed outside in an open circle near their hut.

The baskets are quickly emptied as each Mbuti family stops in front of the household to which they are accustomed to bring their meat. The village householders, in turn, give them packages of rice, beans, peanuts, manioc flour, bananas, and plantains. As the day pro-



gresses, some of the men and women, having nothing else to do, dance in front of their quarters and the villagers and passers-by watch.

Toward nightfall, the women and children go into the huts. The men build a fire and sit down to sing. Villagers begin to come outdoors



to listen. In the dark, the Molimo, well hidden by a tight group of youths moving closely together in the distance, circles the village, singing and echoing the songs of the men by the fire. Then the Molimo disappears. The Mbuti are sure the villagers have no idea that the Molimo is a trumpet blown by one of their band. Whether the villagers suspect the truth no one will ever know. They will not reveal this knowledge, because the Mbuti may be offended and take their meat elsewhere. The Mbuti do not care to question the villagers. They enjoy the evening meal their wives prepare from the villagers' products, and many men get drunk on the beer. Since the Molimo ceremony is theirs alone, they do not invite the villagers to join the feast.

The Mbuti may spend a few days in the village. But they soon tire of the sun and the dust. They have consumed the food obtained in trade with the villagers. Each family begs more food

for their journey to the forest, as they get ready to leave. If a Mbuti feels that his patron has not traded fairly, he will not hesitate (after he has begged for more and been refused) to help himself or herself from a nearby banana grove. Stealing is forbidden among the Mbuti, but to steal from the villagers is commendable. The fields that produce the crops were once part of the forest and belonged to the Mbuti. They are merely taking from their own land.

Back at the campfire in the forest, the theft will make a good joke and cause much laughter and hand-clapping. The Mbuti will readily demonstrate in a dance how he begged for the food, how his wife begged for the food, how they were refused, and how he filled a burden basket anyway when the villager's back was turned.

A villager (with a few friends to help him out) sometimes decides to go after a Mbuti family. He wants to claim his produce or to

ask for some meat in return. However, such a trip into the unfamiliar forest is always unsuccessful. The Mbuti, hearing the approach of the villager's party, disappear from their camp. They are not likely to reappear as long as the unwelcome visitors are there. So to this day, the Mbuti successfully have kept their camps free from invading villagers.

6

Modern Times



In recent years the Mbuti life in their beloved forest has changed very little as compared to the great changes that have occurred in other African societies. The changes that *have* taken place have been gradual, and they have not disrupted their basically nomadic way of living. The Mbuti have preserved with great intelli-

gence their remarkably democratic self-government. They respect individual liberty. They still feel that everyone is equal. Each individual in the forest is assured that he can survive in it. Pygmy groups live in peace with one another and acknowledge the territorial limits that help maintain the peace.

The agricultural people who live on the fringes of the Ituri forest are mainly Bantu—Negro groups who long ago began to immigrate from Nigeria, the Cameroons, North Africa, and the Sudan into the Congo. Some experts claim this movement of people took place as far back as 2000 years ago; others claim it occurred only 300 or 400 years ago, or perhaps even later. These immigrants were mostly African farmers in search of homelands. They immediately set to work cutting down trees, clearing the ground for farms. They planted bananas, plantains, millet, and manioc. For meat, they raised chickens and goats.

Unlike the Mbuti, these people believed in spirits. The dark forest to them was filled with spirits, and they feared it. The Mbuti took advantage of these fears and did not try to dispel them. So the villagers stayed out of the forest and depended on the Mbuti hunters to get game for them in exchange for farm produce. The trade seemed fair. The hunters liked to hunt. They found the bananas, the manioc flour, the cereals tastier than some of the roots and plants they gathered in the forest. The fact that the villagers were cheating them and did not give the hunters full value for their meat did not bother the forest people at first. Their wants remained simple. Over the centuries, however, the Mbuti grew to depend on the luxuries of the villagers.

The Bantu tribesmen were not long content with this profitable trade. They looked down upon these short people, even though they themselves were not much taller. In time they

invited the Mbuti to live in their villages. A householder set space aside on his grounds for a Mbuti family to build a hut. The village set aside space on its outskirts, where the Pygmies could gather to dance and sing over their communal fire. The Mbuti at first welcomed the chance to get to know the villagers. Then the Bantu began to treat the Pygmies as though they had to work for them.

Soon the Mbuti found out that they could not stand village life for long. The polluted water made them ill. Some Mbuti died of sunstroke. They needed to return to the forest, to its refreshing coolness and clear water. The Bantu were disappointed that their scheming did not bring the desired results. But they could not prevent the Pygmies from slipping off into their forest. Each host persisted, however, in calling the particular family with whom he traded and who camped near him *his* Pygmies. When he saw another villager trading

with *his* Pygmies, he demanded a share as their owner. The Mbuti, for their part, refused to acknowledge any claims upon them. They traded with whomever they fancied and with whoever seemed to treat them fairly.

Although the Mbuti refused to become warriors, when one Bantu group fought another, they were good scouts. They knew the forest and could move quickly to warn that an enemy was approaching. Gratefully, the warring Bantu rewarded the scouts with metal arrowpoints and spears and knives—and generous quantities of homemade beer. The Mbuti learned to like the beer and gladly traded their meat. The metal arrowpoints they found superior to their own poisoned arrows mainly because they did not have to labor making them.

Recently, according to European reports, some Mbuti have begun to make their own metal arrowpoints, axes, machetes, and knives. They learn readily to work with metal and the

ware is of good quality. In the early days, however, the villagers did not let the Mbuti learn smithing. They usually surrounded the smithy with an aura of secrecy, since they preferred to have the Mbuti depend upon them for metal. In fact, if a Mbuti hunter failed to supply *his* host with meat, the host demanded the return of the metal spear he had given *his* Pygmy. However, the Mbuti soon learned ways to avoid returning "borrowed weapons."

To further insure Mbuti dependence upon them, the villagers devised all sorts of kinship and religious ties. A host offered to give a wedding feast for his Pygmy family. The Mbuti like feasts and readily accepted. The host then arranged to pay the so-called Bantu owner of the bride's family a bride-price. Among the villagers a man or his family pay the parents of the bride a set amount for the bride. The bride-price may be a few head of cattle or some cloth. A Pygmy man, however, merely offers

gifts from the hunt to the girl's parents. If they accept the gifts, they consent to the marriage. Having paid the bride-price, given a wedding feast for the two families and their relations, the Bantu host then claimed the married people as *his* Pygmies. Their children in years to come were also to become *his* property.

But the above obligations were disregarded by the parties concerned. And so the Mbuti couple, once the wedding had taken place, felt free to trade with whomever they favored among the villagers.

To date, of all the Pygmy groups in the Congo, the Mbuti have been most successful in their resistance to this integration with the villagers. They have, therefore, retained much of their old ways of life. Other Pygmy groups have not fared as well. Those living to the west and along the Atlantic coast, the Binga and the Tswa, are now mostly mixed with their Negro farming neighbors. A villager gladly takes a

Pygmy girl for a second or third wife. The bride-price for a Pygmy girl is low. Her people are happy to get a gift of a few chickens, a spear, or a bundle of arrows. The Pygmy women make good wives, since they work hard and do not demand as many luxuries as their Negro co-wives. The children of these mixed marriages are growing taller and fit in well with their father's other offspring.

The largest of these Pygmy groups, the Tswa, have mixed with the Mongo people, a large group of Bantu. The Pygmy Tswa now may number close to 100,000 people. They are hunters, fishermen, and food gatherers.

When Belgium took control of the Congo, less than 100 years ago, the colonization greatly affected the Pygmies too. The Belgian government claims that it never intended to harm these forest dwellers. It wanted them to remain untouched, free to follow the way of life that most suited them. Although the colon-

ial government did not invade the forests, it did not prevent the Bantu from exploiting the Pygmies. Evidently the Belgians assumed that the Mbuti were happy with their relationship to the villagers. The Europeans did not ask the Mbuti what they wanted. Instead, the government let the village chiefs keep track of the Pygmies. The chiefs forced them to work on the plantations, herd their goats, do road work, and guard the plantations against marauding wildlife. The only defense these forest people had was to disappear into the forest when life and work became too hard to bear. At best, the village chiefs and police could make only token forays into the forest in search of their Pygmies. On the whole, the Mbuti gained practically nothing during the Belgian colonial period.

Then, on June 30, 1960, the Congo received its independence. The new nation, the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Kinshasa), is composed of some 200 different tribes. Each group

immediately began to make demands for special government recognition and power. This situation led to a breakup—secession, warfare, and killing.

In the strife-torn country, no one seems concerned over the fate of the Pygmies. And as in previous times, when tribes in their country were at war, the Mbuti have retired deeper into the peace of their forest. From time to time a



few men venture out to get some tobacco or a potful of beer and listen to the news of the day. How long these forest people will be able to hold on to their own world is hard to predict. For centuries they succeeded in resisting the pressure of invaders. In fact, about twenty years ago, they refused the Belgian government's offer to become full citizens, free of their village neighbors. They said they preferred to continue their way of life within their forest. And the Mbuti have not—as yet—changed their mind.

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